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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to predict maintenance of foster home placement. Fifty-one foster children comprised the sample: 47 were involved in the Casey Family Program in Montana, and four were past participants. Case files provided the first and major data base. Caseworker ratings, a second data source, were obtained on children's personal characteristics, foster family characteristics, and factors related to foster placement breakdown. The third data source involved six categories of archival data regarding foster children (for instance, placement history, risk factors, and relationship factors). Factor analysis of the data produced 324 items pertinent to predicting foster home maintenance. These items were grouped into seven domains: personal and demographic characteristics, natural family history, relationships and developmental factors, placement history, present foster family characteristics, and factors involved in placement breakdown or change. Outcome variables included occurrence of placement breakdown, as well as caseworker ratings of three factors: the child's level of functioning, the foster family's level of functioning, and the likelihood of choosing specific foster families for future placements. Results indicated foster mothers with strong emotional coherence generally correlated with high ratings of foster children's overall functioning and with stable placements. Placement breakdown was highly predictable when foster child and foster family characteristics were considered. (Author/DB)

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Risk Factors, Superior Adaptive Capacity, and Characteristics of the Foster Home as Predictors of Maintenance of Foster Placement[1]

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Problem

Research conducted in a variety of settings (e.g., Rutter, 1978) has shown that risk factors in natural and foster family history such as severe marital discord, low social status, overcrowding in the home, psychiatric disorder in the mother, criminal activities by the father, and admission to institutional care place children at greatly increased risk with respect to problems such as serious mental illness, dissolution of the natural family, and breakdown of subsequent foster family placements.

As Garmezy (1976) has pointed out, however, some children beset by serious stress and disruptive influence display every sign of psychological well-being and appear able to cope with problems that would disable most children. Among the factors which characterize such "superkids" are the ability to attract and use adult support, a high degree of autonomy and ego strength, and both traditional and creative achievement.

The purpose of this study was to predict maintenance of foster home placement as a function of: 1) serious disruptive factors in the child's background; 2) ratings by caseworkers of the child's present functioning and of personality variables of the kinds described by Garmezy; and 3) an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the foster home, especially in terms of characteristics of the foster mother and father.

Method

The sample was composed of 51 children for whom substantially complete data were available from among 54 who had participated in the Montana Division of the Casey Family Program. Forty-seven of the 51 are presently in the program; the other four are past participants for whom complete data were available.

Data Sources

Three sources of information provided the data for the study. One major reservoir was case files, which were especially useful with respect to factual information such as age, ethnic background, number of prior placements, and the like. Caseworker ratings were used to assess many of the personal qualities of the children in the sample and also as indicators of characteristics of foster families. Categorizations and summaries of archival data compiled by M. Stuart in her "1979 Special Project" constituted the third data source.

Instruments

Caseworker Ratings (CSR). The variables in the CSR were descriptions of the foster children served by the Program and their foster families which could be reliably rated by the caseworkers and which had potential relevance for predicting the degree to which children might benefit from the program.

In using the CSR, each caseworker provided ratings (or retrieved archival data) for each child with whom he/she worked on: 1) personal characteristics such as achievement, frustration tolerance and self-esteem; 2) characteristics of the child's foster family such as the ability of the foster family to share feelings and the factors that had motivated it to accept the foster child; and 3) factors which had led to placement breakdown or change in the case of children who had had such a change. In addition, the caseworker provided a rating of each child's overall global level of functioning, a rating of the overall global level of functioning of the foster family, and a rating of the caseworker's willingness to choose the foster family in question to be a foster family again, although not necessarily for the same child. Finally, each caseworker labelled his/her own overall professional

style as more client-oriented or more family-oriented and also as more supportive or more confronting.

1979 Special Project (MSSP). In examining a sample of 54 case files during 1979 and 1980, M. Stuart compiled, summarized and categorized the archival data available for each child under six major headings: 1) demographic data specific to the child; 2) history of the child's natural family and its demographic characteristics; 3) child's placement history; 4) relationship and developmental factors; 5) risk factors; and 6) evaluator commentary regarding factors viewed as important for each individual.

Response Scales, Content Analysis and Coding

The majority of items in the CSR were rated as: "1"--"true about a given child" or "-1"--"not true." If the caseworker was uncertain whether an item correctly described a child, a "0" for "uncertain" was recorded. Where a given item was "especially true" about a child, a "2" was used to indicate this fact; a "-2" signified that an item was an "especially bad description" of a child or "especially untrue." Where appropriate, "true" was understood to signify "yes," or "accurate," or "correct," or "does describe the child," etc. The global ratings used a nine-point scale from "1"--"extremely poor," through "5"--"average," up to "9"--"extremely good."

Factors involved in placement breakdown or change were rated only for children for whom such a change had taken place. If more than one change had taken place, the ratings were made with respect to the most recent one.

In rating foster family characteristics for children who had suffered a breakdown or change, the characteristics of all foster families with whom the child had been placed were rated. Generally, however, only those of the present (or most recent, if the child was not then in foster family care)

one were used, since exploratory data analysis indicated no difference in the conclusion reached based on these differing data sets.

Before making their ratings, the caseworkers discussed in a group setting the precise meanings of the various items in the CSR with the senior author to insure a common frame of reference. Use of extreme categories of response was discouraged unless they were clearly called for. The caseworkers were also instructed to rate a single item at a time for all children under their supervision and to routinely reconsider the first few ratings for every item to avoid possible adaptation level errors.

The numerical ratings from the CSR were coded directly onto IBM cards. Only minor data editing was required. For the most part, this involved a few instances where "irrelevant" was the appropriate response but was not included among the response alternatives. A total of 151 variables was coded.

The data from Stuart's "1979 Special Project" were first subjected to content analysis and then (with a few exceptions that will be mentioned below) the resulting categories coded as binary variables.

In the content analysis of risk factors in the natural home, every risk cited by Stuart for each of the 51 children in the study was listed. There was a total of 27 such factors including "rejection by mother," "desertion by father," "neglect," and so on. Several of the 27 factors appeared to be instances of the same category, however. "Family violence," "physical abuse of wife and children," and "father beat mother" obviously overlapped considerably, especially given the other information in the summaries, and they were placed in a single category, "family violence." Content analysis resulted in 18 common categories and one catchall entitled "Other," which contained risks which occurred only a single time.

A total of 177 variables resulted from quantification of the "1979 Special Project." Several of these were variations in quantifying the same subset of data and four were eliminated as redundant, leaving 173 variables.

Reliability

Stuart independently reworked four of 51 MSSP summaries, and an estimate of the reliability of the summaries based upon this subsample was calculated as:

$$\frac{\text{number same categorizations} - \text{number different categorizations}}{\text{total number of categorizations}}$$

The value of the coefficient was .94.

The first and second authors independently analyzed four of the content categories for the 51 MSSP summaries and a coefficient of agreement was calculated as above. The value of the coefficient was .96.

No independent estimate of reliability was available for the CSR data, but reliabilities for similar procedures generally range between .75 and .95 (Nunnally, 1967).

Analysis

There were 324 variables which remained after redundant items were eliminated. They were grouped into the following seven domains to facilitate understanding: I) personal and demographic characteristics of the child; II) natural family history; III) relationships and developmental factors; IV) placement history (including stepparents); V) present placement situation; VI) present foster family characteristics; and VII) factors involved in placement breakdown or change while in the program.

The mean and standard deviation of each variable was calculated as well as the correlation of each with five dependent or outcome variables. The outcome variables are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Outcome Variables

1. The occurrence of one or more placement breakdowns while in the program.

2. Caseworker ratings on a 9-point scale of the foster child's present, overall global level of functioning.

3. A 10-point global scale of youth functioning reflecting input from the caseworker, the foster family, and the Montana Division supervisor.

4. Caseworker ratings on a 9-point scale of present, overall global level of functioning of the foster family.

5. Caseworker ratings on a 9-point scale of whether the caseworker would choose a child's foster family as a foster family again if the decision were to be made on the basis of present knowledge.

The variables in each of the seven domains were intercorrelated and factor analyzed to determine whether relationships among them might be exploited in order to produce lower-rank prediction models. The factor structures were in all cases complex and unwieldy, and single variables rather than factors were therefore used in all prediction models.

Results and Discussion

What follows is a descriptive summary of the 51 children in the study based upon the statistical data generated from the 324 items.

Sex, Age, Race and Religion

Fifty-nine percent of the sample were males and 41 percent were females. The average age of the children in the sample was 13.96 years. Sixteen percent ranged from six to ten years of age, 49% were from 11 to 15, and 35% were 16 to 22 years old.

In terms of racial background, 63% of the sample were identified as Caucasian, 6% were Indian, 18% were mixed Indian and other race(s), and 13% belonged to other or unknown racial groups.

Twenty-six percent of the children were identified as Catholic, 6% were Mormons, 16% were affiliated with other Protestant denominations, and 52% were either members of non-Christian faiths or, most often, were not affiliated with a religious group.

Natural Mother and Father

Both natural parents were known for 77% of the sample, 41% were divorced, and, in 28% of cases, one or both natural parents were known to be deceased.

For the mothers for whom data were available, average age at the birth of this child was 24.35 years, but 39% were aged 22 years or younger. The mother currently had some contact with her child in 41% of cases, had no contact or involvement 29% of the time, and was known to be hospitalized or institutionalized in 25% of cases and deceased in 6% of cases. Forty-one percent of the natural mothers of children in the sample had rejected, abused, neglected or deserted them, and 45% had a history of alcohol problems, mental illness, or suicide. In 20% of case files, it was noted that the mother had been very attached to or very affectionate with her child.

The average age of the natural father at the birth of this child, where data were available, was 30.36 years. The father had sporadic or regular contact with his child in 16% of cases, had no contact in 57% of cases, and no information existed or the father was unknown for 28% of the children in the sample. Twelve percent of the natural fathers were known to be deceased and about 4% were hospitalized with chronic health problems. Sixteen percent of the fathers had a history of alcohol problems, and 12% had a

criminal record. Thirty-one percent of the natural fathers had been classified as rejecting the child, not accepting it, or having no relationship with it, and 4% were known to have abused the child.

Natural Siblings and Other Relatives

Ninety percent of the children in the sample had full or half siblings and 88% of these had siblings within five years of their own age. In 20% of cases, little or no information was available regarding past relationships with natural siblings, but 76% of the children in the sample who had siblings were known to have lived with one or more of them at sometime in the past and 35% had a close relationship with at least one sibling. On the other hand, 30% of the children had a poor relationship or active rivalry with one or more siblings. With respect to present relationships with siblings, in 17% of instances the whereabouts of the siblings was unknown or little information existed. However, 28% of the children had frequent contact with siblings, 39% had sporadic contact, and 26% were thought to have no present contact with natural siblings.

Fifty-three percent of the children in the sample were reported to have had no natural relatives, besides parents or siblings, who were important figures in their past. Approximately 60% of the children had such relatives who at present played an important role in their lives or with whom they were now in contact. The relatives most frequently described as being important in the past were grandparents in 35% of cases, and aunts, uncles and cousins in 14% of cases.

Risk Factors and Responses to Threat

Eighteen categories of factors in the natural family which put the development and security of the children in the sample at risk appeared in the

content analysis of Stuart's "1979 Special Project." Nine of these occurred in 10% or more of cases. In order of descending frequency, they are: rejection by mother--39%; failure of placements--39%; abuse, physical or emotional--37%; alcohol problems in the natural family--31%; natural mother's illness or death or suicide--29%; neglect--29%; family turmoil or disruption--26%; desertion by father--20%; and divorce--20%.

The children exhibited, in either or both the natural family or placement setting, 17 categories of defenses or responses to perceived threat. Four categories occurred in more than 10% of cases. In order of descending frequency, they are: passive-aggressive behavior--39%; aggression or violence--25%; acting out--18%; and withdrawn or moody behavior--14%.

Personal Qualities

Of 22 personal qualities on which caseworkers were asked to rate the children in the sample, only three might be said to characterize the group to any significant degree, i.e., had means greater than or equal to |.75|. The children were rated as likeable, as dressing and grooming neatly, and hence not having a street-urchin appearance.

Twenty-nine percent of the children had a hobby to which they were seriously devoted; the most frequent hobbies were music and sports.

Placement History

Forty-one percent of the children in the sample had been in foster care placements prior to the current one. The average age at first placement was 6.12 years, but for 51% of the children it occurred before five years of age. For 37%, first placement occurred between 6 and 10 years of age, and, for the remaining 12%, it occurred at age 11 or later. Four settings were most common for a first placement: friends or relatives--38%; foster care and receiving--49% and 14%, respectively; and institutions--6%.

Six reasons for first placement were cited in 10% or more of cases. In order of descending frequency they are: some combination of desertion, abuse, relinquishment or family disruption--53%; death of parent(s) and health problems of parent(s)--29%; relinquishment alone--26%; abuse and neglect--24%; health of parent(s) alone--22%; behavior problems--10%.

For children in the sample who had had placements subsequent to the first one, the average number of such placements was 4.88. Sixty-eight percent had had 0-5 subsequent placements, 24% had had 6-10 subsequent placements, 6% had had 11-15 subsequent placements, and 2% had had more than 15. Thirty-one percent had had at least one placement in an institution.

The most common child-related category of reasons for placement breakdown was violent or aggressive behavior by itself or in conjunction with acting out that involved drinking, stealing, sexual behavior or firesetting. Such behavior was cited in 31% of cases. Nine other child-related categories of reasons for placement breakdown were mentioned. In order of descending frequency they are: being untrustworthy--16%; passive-aggressive behavior--16%; hyperactivity--12%; anger, hostility, and withdrawal--8%; failure to integrate into the foster family--8%; inability to cope with authority--8%; inability of the foster parent(s) to cope with the child--6%; running away--6%; and throwing tantrums--4%.

Among the 12 categories of risk factors cited as being involved with breakdown of subsequent placements, seven occurred in more than 10% of instances. In order of decreasing frequency they are: school problems--43%; the nature of the placement itself--29%; rejection by the foster family--18%; foster family disruption--18%; death of a natural parent or foster parent--16%; peer problems--12%; and acting out behavior--12%.

Although 14% of Stuart's summaries noted instances in which a stepfather was abusive, there were also 14% of cases in which past adoptive parents became significant figures to the children. In 10% of cases, continuing contact with past foster parents was noted as occurring.

Present Placement Situation

Of the 51 children in the sample, 76% were in long term family care, 8% were in quasi-independent care, 4% were in a public institution, 4% were in the Scholarship Program, 2% were in a group home setting, 2% were in private residential care, and the whereabouts of the other 2% was unknown.

The average age of the child upon entering the program was 10.73 years. For 75% of the children, final separation from the natural parents had occurred. In 53% of cases, the program had contact with the natural mother, and in 45% of cases it had contact with the natural father.

A majority of present placements appeared to be good ones: 43% of present foster parents were described as accepting and positive and 31% were described as having a parental attitude. On the other hand, 24% of present foster parents reported having some problems with the child, and 8% reported major problems. These figures are in substantial agreement with Stuart's assessment of important relationship and developmental factors. She found evidence that at least 39% of the children in the sample were able to form and maintain relationships and be accepted but that 33% were at considerable risk because of poor mothering, lack of nurturing, abuse or neglect.

Present Foster Family Characteristics

Most of the present foster families lived in urban or suburban locations, and there was a modest tendency for them to reside in the same part of the state as the natural family came from. They were generally in lower middle

class circumstances. The average age of the foster father was 43.96 years and the average age of the foster mother was 41.90 years; however, the respective standard deviations of 9.67 years and 9.59 years demonstrate the considerable age range of the foster parents. The foster parents in general had very stable relationships: the average length of the marriage was 19.36 years. They had little tendency to move from one location to another.

Eighty-eight percent of the foster fathers and 43% of the foster mothers were rated as having good job security. The average educational level of both foster parents was somewhat below the high school graduate level, but, again, as a group the foster parents were quite variable in this regard. There was some tendency for both the foster mother and the foster father to have been the oldest child in their own natural family.

Forty percent of the time, the foster child was younger than any of the natural children in the foster family; 26% of the time the foster child was older than any natural child; and 34% of the time he/she was intermediate in age with respect to the natural children. There were, on the average, 1.73 natural children in the families with which the children in the program were placed, and very few of these were preschoolers. In 78% of cases, the foster family had had previous experience with the age group of the foster child, but only 28% of the foster families had had previous experience with foster care.

The foster families were rated by the caseworkers on a wide variety of characteristics, but in only six cases was the average rating high enough ($>|.75|$) to conclude that the characteristic was an apt description of the foster families as a group. Taking the strongest relationships first, the female role model in the foster family was rated as strong and the foster

father was viewed as being emotionally involved with the child. The foster family's relationship to its own extended family was rated as good and its determination to succeed as a foster family was high. The foster mother was not viewed as being in the process of liberation nor was taking the foster child into the home an attempt to avoid starting a new phase of marriage.

Fifteen factors which might have motivated the foster family to accept a foster child or which might have precipitated such a move were examined. Only two of them received affirmative ratings--social commitment and "Casey long term"--and these were not high. Almost all of the others were soundly rejected, i.e., the ratings made clear that they did not characterize the group as a whole, although of course, any of them may have aptly described the motivation of individual families.

Factors Involved in Placement Breakdown or Change

Twenty-seven percent, or 14 of 51, of the children in the sample had experienced a placement breakdown or change while in the program. All had been in long term family care, and, at the time of this study, four were in a second foster home placement, five were in institutional settings, two left the program to begin independent living, and two left for other or unknown reasons. Of the four young people who had left the program, the average age at termination was 17.00 years. For the ten who remained in the program, the average length of time spent in their most recent placement was 10.70 months. All of these young people received two or more significant contacts per month, i.e., medium or high intensity services.

Of the 14 children in the sample who had experienced a placement breakdown or change, there were 12 cases where gradual reciprocal friction had developed between the child and his/her foster family, and there were two cases where sudden reciprocal friction developed. It appeared that in eight

cases the child initiated the breakdown whereas the the foster family initiated it in six cases. In seven cases, the foster family appeared to have lost its motivation to keep the child and in another the foster parents were divorced and the family was disrupted.

In the judgment of the caseworkers, a mismatch had been made between the child and the foster family in six instances, and in two others the foster child had developed beyond the foster family (not because of nurturing or emancipation). Ten children had shown stress in the foster home long after the original placement and three exhibited anniversary effects. Eleven children had had contact with members of their nuclear natural family within the last two years and for nine of them the outcome of these contacts was positive. Eleven of the 14 children retained feelings of possession of the natural parents and/or a strong image of them.

Outcome Variables

As mentioned above, 27% of the children in the sample had suffered a placement breakdown or change while in the program whereas 73% remained in their initial placement.

On a 9-point scale, the average overall global level of functioning of the 51 children was rated 4.57 by the caseworkers. The standard deviation was 2.26, demonstrating that a substantial degree of variation in functioning existed.

The weighted average rating of youth functioning was 3.06 with a standard deviation of .50. Although the original rating scale was a 10-point one, the actual range of the weighted ratings was from 2.08 to 4.13.

The average rating on a 9-point scale of the present, overall global level of functioning of the foster families was 5.92. The standard deviation

of these caseworker ratings was 2.04. On a -2 to 2 scale with 0 as the neutral point, the average caseworker rating of willingness to choose the foster family as a foster family again (although not necessarily for the same child) was .28 with a standard deviation of 1.36.

Taken together, the values of these outcome variables represent a substantial degree of programmatic and individual success. Given the very unpromising histories of many of the children in the sample, a 73% rate of placement stability is noteworthy. The overall level of functioning of the children in the sample was quite variable, in both the high and low directions, but, on the average, acceptable values were achieved. The foster families were viewed as functioning at a better-than-average level, and, although the ratings were variable, there was a modest overall tendency among the caseworkers to choose them as foster families again.

Formal Predictive Models

A major goal of the study was the construction of a formal model for the prediction of placement breakdown or change while in the program. In a rigorous sense, the models are postdictive, in that archival data retrieved from case files and ratings generated by the caseworkers were to be utilized to "predict" placement breakdowns or changes that had already occurred. There is no logical difficulty with such an approach (Nunnally, 1967), but the validity of the model remains in question until it is actually used to generate predictions about future placement breakdowns or changes.

Because the strength of the relationships among the variables in this study had been assessed primarily by means of correlation coefficients and because of the large number of variables examined, the statistical technique chosen to generate formal models was multiple regression. The particular model building system utilized is known as the "stepdown" approach (Snedecor, 1967).

The variables which correlated |.35| or greater with the occurrence of one or more placement breakdowns while in the program are listed in Table 2. Taken as a whole, the set of predictor variables empahsizes several aspects of the foster child, his/her history, and the characteristics of the foster home which contributed to maintaining a stable placement.

Factors which were associated with stable placements were a well-established, strongly functioning foster family with good relationships to its own extended family, and the ability to tolerate unassimilated aspects of the foster child. The presence of strong emotional coherence in the foster mother, emotional involvement by the foster father with the child, a "child-centered" atmosphere, and the lack of a "smothering" climate were also positive factors. Absence of contact between the child and his/her natural father also appeared to be a concomitant of stable foster placements while in the program.

A previous institutional placement was a strong negative indicator, as were failure to attach, running away, many previous placements and passive-aggressive behavior by the child. The greater a child's current age, the older his/her age at first placement, and the older he/she was at the time of entering the program, the more likely it was that there would be a placement breakdown.

The regression equation which resulted from stepdown analysis of the variables in Table 2 is:

$$V222 = 0.53 - 0.24V238 - 0.19V243 - 0.01V260 + 0.03V147 + 0.45V157 + 0.76V178$$

R^2 was equal to .77 and the "shrunken" value equalled .74.

The subset of predictor variables included in the regression equation did not, as can be seen from Table 2, include all of the variables which were most highly correlated with the outcome variable. The reason is that the

Table 2

Variables Which Correlated with Variable 222, Occurrence of One or More Placement Breakdowns While in the Program

	Variable	Correlation
184.	Is in long-term family care.	-.59
170.	Child is not presently in foster care.	.58
152.	At least one placement in an institution.	.53
260.	Length of marriage of foster parents in years.	-.49
276.	Foster family can tolerate unassimilated aspects of the foster child (such as symbolic retention of the natural parents).	-.47
157.	Child-related reasons for placement breakdown: passive-aggressive.	.46
232.	Foster family's relationship to its own extended family is good.	-.44
178.	Risk factors in subsequent placements: failure to attach.	.41
50.	Response to threat/defense is running away.	.41
28.	Age in years.	.40
238.	Foster father is emotionally involved with child.	-.39
296.	Present, overall global functioning of foster family.	-.39
243.	Nurturing/overnurturing/smothering climate exists in foster home.	-.37
248.	The foster home is "child-centered."	-.37
249.	Emotional coherence of foster mother is strong.	-.37
147.	Number of subsequent placements.	.37
208.	Child's age in years when entered program.	.36
132.	Age at first placement 11 or more years, frequency.	.35
88.	Father presently has no contact with child.	-.35
223.	Age of foster father in years.	-.35

stepdown procedure attempts to use variables which contribute new information to the prediction of the outcome variable and which do not repeat information already known. Many of the variables which were most highly correlated with the outcome were redundant when considered in combination with the other predictors and were therefore deleted.

For similar, but conceptual as well as statistical reasons, "Present overall global functioning of the foster family," was not included in the stepdown analysis. It was felt that it was a compound of many of the individual predictor variables in the study. Had it been included in the analysis, several of the individual variables might have been eliminated by the stepdown procedure. But the individual variables were thought to be of greater heuristic value and, in all likelihood, equal predictive value.

The R^2 value obtained was quite high when compared to those usually reported in behavioral and social science research. One reason to believe that higher-than-ordinary values might be expected in the present study was that there was a very large number of relatively uncorrelated independent variables from among which predictors could be chosen. In general, better predictions can be made when sets of predictor variables are available all of which correlate substantially with the outcome variable but only slightly with each other.

On the other hand, the relatively small sample of children and the very large of number of predictor variables analyzed made it quite likely that chance factors would be capitalized on in generating prediction equations. It is to be expected that if the present results were extended to another sample of children, the values of R^2 would decline, perhaps sharply, and/or that a somewhat different set of predictor variables might be selected by

the stepdown procedure. Plans to cross validate this study have been proposed to the Casey Family Program.

Conclusions

There are numerous communalities in the backgrounds of the children in the program which have placed them at high risk for successful placement in foster homes. The foster families with which they have been placed are less easily characterized as a group, but specific characteristics such as a foster mother with strong emotional coherence are generally correlated with high ratings of the foster child's overall functioning and with the stability of the placement.

Placement breakdown is highly predictable as a function of the characteristics of the foster child, his/her history, and the characteristics of the foster family. Assessment of precisely how accurately the outcome variables can be predicted must await cross validation, because of the relatively small sample of children and the large number of predictors employed in the study.

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